



forestry, fisheries & the environment

Department:
Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

PILCHARD HERPESVIRUS-ASSOCIATED SARDINE MORTALITY EVENT

Updated 8 September 2026

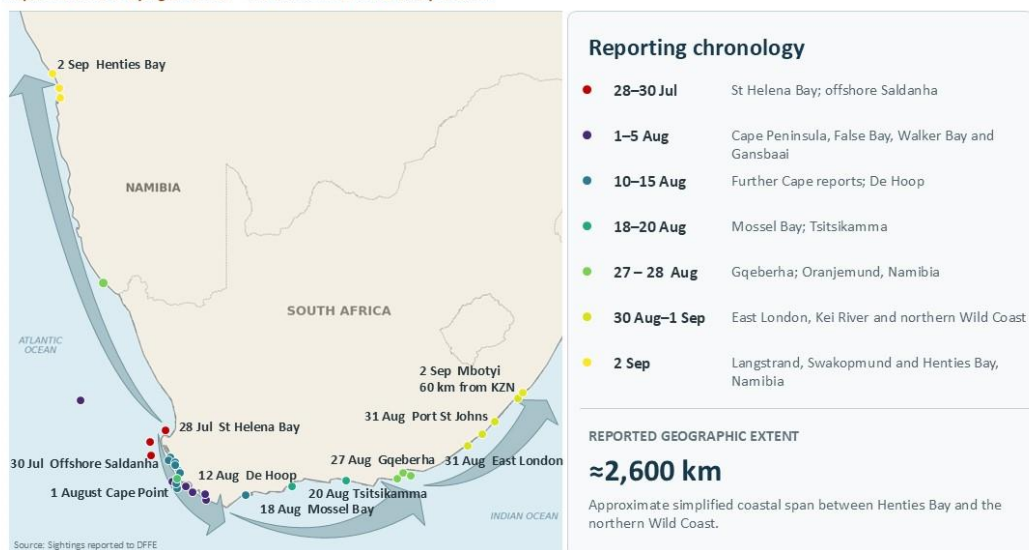
CURRENT SITUATION

- South Africa is experiencing an unusual sardine mortality event that has now been reported over a very wide geographic area, extending from the Western Cape through the southern and eastern coasts, into the northern Wild Coast and along the Namibian coast.
- Pilchard herpesvirus (PHV) has been confirmed in sardines associated with the mortality event, including sardines collected in Gqeberha. PHV remains the leading explanation for the observed mortalities, although the role of the virus and the possible contribution of environmental factors are still being investigated.
- The full extent and impact of the mortality event are not yet known. **The Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE)** and its scientific partners are continuing to monitor new reports, undertake diagnostic testing and investigate the distribution, scale and progression of the event, as well as its potential implications for the sardine population and the wider marine ecosystem.
- PHV is not known to infect people. Commercially produced canned sardines processed under approved conditions remain safe to consume. The public should not collect, eat or feed to

Reported progression of sardine mortality sightings

First reports recorded from 28 July to 4 September 2026

Reported dead or dying sardines — not confirmed PHV at every location



pets dead or dying sardines found on beaches or at sea, because of the risks associated with decomposition and contamination.

17. Could the mortality affect African penguins and other predators?

Potentially. Sardines are an important prey species for seabirds and marine mammals, including African penguins. A substantial reduction in sardine availability could have ecological consequences. The significance of any effect will depend on the magnitude, location and duration of any reduction in sardine availability. DFFE is monitoring possible effects on sardine-dependent predators.

18. Could PHV spread between sardine populations over long distances?

Transmission between infected and susceptible sardines or through infectious biological material is plausible, and sardines are mobile schooling fish. However, the sequence of reported mortality sightings does not prove transmission between each locality. Fish movements, currents, uneven surveillance and reporting delays must also be considered.

19. Does the Namibian mortality mean that PHV has spread into Namibia?

Not yet. Sardine strandings have been reported along the Namibian coast, including as far north as Henties Bay, but the cause of those mortalities has not been established. Namibian authorities are cooperating in providing samples for PHV testing. It would be premature to attribute the Namibian reports to PHV until this testing is completed.

20. How could PHV have entered South Africa?

The source and route of introduction remain unknown. Possible pathways under consideration include movement of infected fish or biological material, imported sardines or bait, and other potential biosecurity pathways. No particular country, company, fishery, imported product or shipping route has been identified as the source.

21. Is DFFE investigating imported frozen sardines, bait or shipping as possible pathways?

Yes. DFFE is testing imported sardine samples supplied by industry as part of the investigation of possible pathways. Imported bait products may also be considered. A previous Australian investigation considered imported baitfish, ballast water, transfer from another species and prior low-level circulation among pilchards. There is currently no evidence that imported frozen sardines, ballast water or any particular shipping route introduced PHV into South African waters.

22. Can the 99.7% match to an Australian PHV sequence tell us where the virus came from?

No. The 99.7% sequence match confirms the identity of the detected viral genetic material as closely related to the Australian PHV sequence used for comparison. It does not establish the geographic origin of the virus or its route of introduction. Additional genomic, epidemiological, historical and biosecurity work is required.

23. How many sardines have been tested for PHV?

Testing has expanded substantially since the initial 15 fish. By 28 August, approximately 160 samples had been submitted for PCR (genetic) testing and 128 had been processed, with DNA sequence confirmation obtained from samples from a further three localities. Testing and confirmatory work continue. The DFFE is also continuing pathology and other scientific investigations.

24. Why can't DFFE give a precise number of sardines that have died?

Most mortality reports are opportunistic observations rather than systematic counts. Photographs and videos generally capture the densest concentrations, while fish may also sink, remain offshore or go undetected. The same fish may potentially be represented in different types of observations. Consequently, the available mortality estimates are scenario-based, highly uncertain and non-additive and should not be summed into a single event-wide total.